

INTERVIEW WITH LILLIAN SMITH

BY: Mildred Heller

QUESTION #1: How long did you live in the home? We want to know how old you were when you came in and how old you were when you left.

I came into the home when I was five, which would have been 1926, and I left when I was sixteen.

QUESTION #2: Do you remember any part of your life before you came into the home?

Oh, certainly. I remember that my father was like a waiter or a steward on ships, which necessitated my being shuttled between two aunts in New Orleans, my mother's sister and my father's sister. One aunt I received a lot of gifts from, but the other I was free to sort of run loose and I was run over by an automobile on Terpsichore Street right off Dryades. That is when the Jewish Federation stepped in and said, this child is not being properly cared for.

Was that the strict aunt or the permissive aunt?

No, that was the permissive aunt.

Your mother was not living?

No, my mother died when I was two, and I say, my father was never here. So these two aunts, and these were hard times and I am sure that I was an additional burden and a very nabish little kid that nobody took that much delight in. This aunt was very sweet, I was crazy about her and I can't say it was her fault, but I ran out into the street in front of a car. I was rushed to Charity Hospital and I remember that just a childish incident, I apparently had never been exposed to a nun and Charity was then staffed by nothing but nuns, and everytime they would come near me I was petrified, I mean it was like a horrible thing to see a nun. I am sure that they did not know why this child was screaming everytime they came near. That was really when the Jewish Federation stepped in and I went into the home, which I can tell you was probably the best thing that ever happened to me.

Do you remember who brought you into the home?

My father was in town at the time and I think it was a very heart breaking thing for him to have to do when I think back. In those days when you got to the home, you were in what they called isolation for two weeks, which meant that you have a thorough physical before, I am sure to protect the other children, if you had some diseases. My father would come and see me every day and one day he arrived and I said what did you bring me today daddy, and he said, darling I didn't have time to bring you anything. I got very pouty and he said, I'm sorry I'll leave, I thought you really wanted to see me and when he left I broke down in tears and I think from that day to this, it taught me to be very grateful for the love of the people that you really care about. I have never gotten over repenting for that horrible thing.

It was heart breaking for me when I heard him.

But he came again, of course?

Oh, sure.

I hope and trust that I apologized.

Did you have any brothers or sisters?

No.

Were you scared or homesick when you were in the infirmary alone?

I think I've always been a very adaptable person, I've decided. I am certain that I must have had some fears, but it was nothing ominous that I can recall, I mean I remember being rather placid as a kid and I guess I just took everything in stride, by the same token, the lonliest moment of my life and probably the scariest was the day I left the home. I remember, I guess the reason was that after you have lived that many years with a hundred and fifty people around you and suddenly you are in the world alone, that is when the impact of a change really hit you. But I recovered from that also.

How did you leave the Home?

Well, I am certain you must know this, but Uncle Harry Ginsburg, whom I adored and it was customary I think when you got to like the sixth or seventh grade at Newman School, you had a personal conference with Uncle Harry and he would ask your wishes about your future, if you felt you had a preference to go on to college or if you wanted to go to business school or what did you see in your future as a fulfillment. I chose to go to business school, so I went to Newman through my freshman year and then chose Cohen High School for four years, which was a combination of academic, mixed with shorthand, typing and bookkeeping, which to this day I am very grateful for because it was the kind of education, the dual education where you received a foundation for something you could do all your life. I feel very secure in the knowledge that if I wanted to tomorrow I could go out and get a job, maybe typing or something. I hope I don't have to, but it's nice to know you can.

We would like to know if you remember any of the rules and do you recall what happened when anybody broke the rules? Did you ever break any rules?

I remember very well. I got into serious trouble over the most ridiculous things. Once Rabbi Likseger saw me chewing gum at Sunday School and he said I want you to go home and tell Uncle Harry that you your chewing gum in Sunday School and I was frightened to tell him and about a week later I was called in and strongly reprimanded; not so much for the chewing of the gum, but because I didn't report my terrible thing I had done.

Uncle Harry had certain things that he thought were uncouth, and chewing gum was one of them. It's really strange now that I think about it, but the most serious infringement of the rules, Irma Simon was my supervisor and she was a wonderful woman who had tremendous integrity and many great demands on you. I mean you had to follow those rules, ~~like-a-general-with-~~ she was like a general with a white glove coming along checking the woodwork to see if you dusted it, and ~~she-had-~~ the rule was that you were never to borrow anybody's clothes and you were never to wear lip stick until you were like thirteen, I think. I had a great desire to grow up, I really loved being around the older people and ~~I-~~ because I had two aunts in the city it gave me a little edge over many of the kids there, as you know it served the whole South and most of the kids really came from Texas or Florida, wherever and I really looked forward to my weekends, visiting

my relatives. On this particular Saturday I knew Irma was going out and I waited for her to get dressed and leave and then I quickly borrowed a girl named Gertude whose hat that she had made at sewing school and I primped and put on whatever makeup that was available to me and I walked out the door and I'm walking down St. Charles Avenue and getting ready to cross the street and I look up at the Street Car and our eyes met. Irma's street car had stopped and I had foolishly walked and caught up with it without realizing that that was her street car and I have never spent a more miserable day because I knew what was going to happen to me when I got home and it happened. She was tough, my privileges were denied, but that was a very serious offense.

Now I know that there was a great deal of hanky-panky that went on at the Home. I mean a lot of stuff that I was probably, I would say about the dumbest most naive human being that ever lived because if it was there I must have either ignored it or been oblivious to it, but there was a lot of romance going on, kids and kids and staff. I mean one of my friends. I don't know if I should say this on here.

At the time you didn't know that any of these things were going on?

No.

You say hanky-panky, you mean some among the kids and some among the kids and staff?

Yes. Right.

Did you have any chores in the Home?

Oh, yes. We had a daily regimentation that, actually I think like on a monthly basis you had a major chore. Like one month you had to get up at 5:00 A.M. in the morning and go into the kitchen and prepare lunches for everybody to take to school. I think to the best of my recollection, you got up in the morning, brushed your teeth, washed your face, made your bed, dusted your room, went to breakfast, swept the courtyard bankets, then you went to school. Whether you went to Newman or to Joseph Cohen, as I did, you walked. Took your lunch and you walked. When we got home in the afternoon, the first thing you did was you changed from what you called your school clothes to your yard clothes, that the differential, which I guess was second best and then on Sunday for Sunday School and Saturday for services, you had your weekend clothes, that was supposed to be your best. Your Sunday go to meeting best. It was a designated time for homework, and a very regimental time for shampooing, you had to be in bed by 10:00 P.M. I think to this day its what I love about going to a Spa, it brings back all the memories of not having to make a single decision, everything was so programmed and so structured and you learned the discipline of organization, really.

What did you do about clothes? Were you allowed to choose your own clothes?

Well, what happened was, I think this is a very interesting facet of what happened in my generation. When I came to the Home, Edward Lashman was the supervisor and it was very institutional, they had a room down stairs where you went to get your dresses when they felt you needed a dress you went to this store room downstairs and they gave you a dress or a pair of shoes or whatever, and Uncle Harry when he became superintendent, was such an innovator and so premature with his concepts and he immediately chose to de-institutionalize and he took the dormitories

and made bedrooms.

You actually had a room of your own, or did you have roommates?

Well, it depended on your age and stage. There were singles, doubles, and some fours. I guess it really depended on some system, I don't know, I can't really recall what it was based on.

The next rule that Uncle Harry made was that the children were to go downtown and buy their clothes like everybody else did. He encouraged dating. He said that we would no longer hold services in our chapel, the children were divided up among the three reform temples, and you were told which temple you belong to, and I guess he evenly divided us among the three temples.

He encouraged Friday night visitors, to invite somebody from school to come over and have dinner. And he really tried to create as normal an environment as was possible then in an institutional situation. I think he did a fantastic job of doing it.

Who were your special friends?

Well, I had a group, Frieda ^{Hyde} Haid, Louise ^K Carp, Floret ^{Jo} Gordon, and myself. We were like the four that were exactly the same age, and sort of followed the same pattern. I of course, as I said loved, I was really a flunky to Millie Gordon because she represented all the glamor in the world and she was a princess when there were no princess' and Adell Kahn, who eventually became my friend and she was Louise's older sister, she was somebody who I sort of catered to. I loved all the really pretty popular girls and those were the ones I kinda of hung out with and got a thrill out of listening to their exciting lives.

Do you recall any other staff members, besides the ones you mentioned?

I remember Mike ^{Gordon} ~~Gordon~~ Girden. I remember

Did you like them.

Oh, yes.

There wasn't anybody that you really didn't like?

I really did not like Martha Buckman. She's dead, poor thing, but she was such a pressy missy thing, I don't know she just got you into trouble. That is the only one that I can recollect that I really wasn't crazy about.

What did you do for fun?

Every year they had the anniversary party, where the kids put on a theatrical performance. I presume that the Jewish community was invited too. I can remember one evening they had a dinner when Edward Benjamin was president, when it was stylish to be Jewish and he was president of the Jewish Federation. When that man and his wife walked in, I thought I was really star struck, she was a beautiful blonde and she had on a black suit with a white mink and hat. I guess it's still in her attic, I mean she's probably still wearing it. I remember we were the waitresses for the evening, serving the table and it was so glamorous and he asked for a cushion, I was the one designated to go get the cushion, so I presumed he was a king and I wondered ever since if he had hemorrhoids or if there was some

other necessity for the cushion. I adored my big sister, I mean that was the most exciting fun. Actually my real big sister was Estelle Simon, who was not very glamorous, she was a nice old maid lady and she lived at the DeSota Hotel and it was very pleasant to me, but when I was about 6 or 7 years old, I came in with my Uncle Harry, who brought me home and I guess I was a born snob because I can remember he had a furniture truck and I was so embarrassed to be riding in a truck I'd hide so no body would see me. Today I jump in a truck with great pride, I mean if the gardner or somebody is going my way I would. I guess it's a matter of security and of growing up. Ray Ligisteen was bringing home the child who was assigned to her, ~~they-were-called-big-sister-and-they-would-~~ and she spotted me and she said, hi, how are you and I said I'm fine. I looked at her and she was so beauthifful to me and she sort of embraced me with this wonderful odor, she wore Channel No. 5, she chewed wigley chewing gum, only while she smoked, and a very lovely laugh. I am sure all these traits I inherited from her. When I took up smoking, I never smoked without having a piece of chewing gum in my mouth, but she represented everything that that was elegant and beautiful. When I was twelve years old, I'll never forget, it was customary to ask me to come to dinner maybe once a month and she would always say what would you like and I would say your baked ham, I remember that was a wonderful treat, or she would ask me to go on a picnic and she would send back a tin picnic box with the danty little sandwiches. It was all so beautiful, I mean it was very impressionable. This particular day she called and she requested that I come to her home on Wednesday afternoon and I said to my friend Rita, I think she must was to tell me that she is going to adopt me and I was so excited. I didn't sleep all night, I said to Freida, you walk there with me after school and when we got there what she wanted to tell me, she wanted to chastise me because I had been at my real big sister, Estelle Simon and a Mrs. Beer was there, a sort of horse face lady who wore her hair in a bun, I can't remember who she was and she told Aunt Ray that I had met her at Aunt Ray's house and that I didn't acknowledge having met her when I was at Aunt Estelle's, I mean the whole thing was so crazy, I can't believe. So you can imagine the kind of disappointment. I adored this woman, I mean I really did love her alot, and I think a lot of whatever I was exposed to between the big sisters and between the rich kids that came to Newman School, I think I got a little over exposure which created my extravagance that haven't left yet.

Do you recall any special celebrations in the Home besides the anniversaries?

Oh, yes. Passover and Hanuka we were asked to write, about a month in advance, what we most wanted for Hanuka and we always had a gift, I don't know if it was what me most wanted, but it was whatever they could afford to give us. We went to services on the holidays and every Friday's there was a lighting of the candles and our special dinner. It was a very home like feeling. Uncle Harry conducted them and he always made them a fun occasion, it was always a nice joyous occasion.

Do you think most of the children felt the way you did about him?

I don't know, I'm really not certain. I know that in Manuel's time it was ^{Vollmer} totally alien to anything that I enjoyed. They were hungry, Mr. Bomer was there they got beatings and it was an ~~interily~~ entirely different environment, an entirely different situation. It was more of a reform school than a Jewish orphanage.

How about Mardi Gras? Did you celebrate Mardi Gras?

Oh, we loved it. That was exciting, they always had a truck and they fixed lunches and we spent the day like all the other normal, crazy people, we got costumes. Now that you mention it, we always had something to look forward to. Of course, when summer came and we went to the Jewish Federation camp, that was a very joyous occasion because we had the packing, getting ready to go. I think we went either on buses or the train, I think we went on the train. I remember I always had a terrible adjustment being the princess I told you I became very early in life, to adapting to a strange bed. I fact once I can remember that there was an outbreak in the Home of chicken pox, so all the people who had chicken pox had to leave the dormitory and go into the infirmary and instead of being in my regular bed, I was placed in a white iron crib and the crib smelled like urine and it was driving me bananas. At age 10 I had already found it offensive, whatever age I was, I found it offensive.

Where one of the kids in the infirmary, did you have chicken pox?

Chicken pox, a terrible case of chicken pox and I can remember I couldn't sleep and I sneaked out of bed and got into bed with the Black nurse or supervisor who was on duty at the time, jsu just to get some sleep because I could not stand sleeping in that bed. That was just a little silly personel thing.

Did you have a chance to celebrate your own birthday?

Yes, they always made an occasion for everybodys birthday. ~~You-~~imagine-~~~~ I imagine you always got a cake. I remember they had a sweet, ~~dearling-~~ darling Black lady who was the cook and I really was crazy about her. Now that I think about her, maybe that is where my love of cooking came from.

I thought you were going to say your love of Black people.

Oh, no that has since dissipated.

Did you have a chance to go into the kitchen and see any cooking?

Oh, certainly. I can remember one of Uncle Harry's innovations was, we're not washing dishes by hand any more and he got probably one of the first electric dish washers, like an industrial one and that was one of the chores of the week, you had to sometimes pick up dishes, sometimes you had to set the tables, sometimes you had to do laundry. They also had like an industrial laundry.

But sometimes did you have a chance to learn to cook at all?

I would think so. I guess you got it by osmosis, I don't think it really was structured or you know, what you call a cooking class to say, but I guess you were there and you observed.

You did visit your family and they visited with you?

Yes.

Did your father leave.

My father left for Europe and he had a brother named Sam Hofsteder, who was a diamond cutter, a very fine diamond cutter and my father's mother was still living and for some reason or other he ended up in Belgium and he got sick while he was there. A few months ago I got a note for Nina Botahiminer, who as you know bought my house on Vendome Place and she said I had an electrician working in the attic a couple of week ago and he came across this post card and I thought it might be something you would want and it was a post-card written by my father from Belgium and he said "my darling Lillian, I'm so happy to read of your happiness and I was worried about my operation that I'm going to have which ultimately lead to his death and he said that hearing about your happiness has taken away all my fear. It was a very touching, beautiful, compassionate little card, and he said really all he ever wanted to do was come back to see his little girl, which of course, he never did.

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Was that your marriage he was talking about?

I don't know. I really should go back and look at the date on the card. I don't know if it was that or whether I told him I was working and I was happy or whatever.

You did hear from him a lot?

Oh, yes.

I think you answered about the camp and the big sister. What did you do with your big sister besides admire her? Did you have dinner with her?

Well, I had dinner at her house and she would show me her clothes and her china. I can remember going to D.H. Holmes and Maison Blanche, I'm not sure which, when she would go to get her hair done. I was star struck. She was just like my idol. Actually another person who was very nice to me at that time was Lillian Gerson, we used to sing on WWL and she would sometimes take me there with her on Saturday morning when she would perform.

When you were in school Lillian, did you have any school friends who were not from the Home?

I remember going to, at Newman I could tell you everybody that was in my class. When I got to Joseph Cohen this was a very different segment of society, this school was near Magazine and Napoleon and it drew from a really poor section of town. It was funny, I went to the Women's Christian Exchange a couple of months ago and actually one of the most attractive girls from school volunteers waited on me there and I ~~said was you~~ asked her did you graduate from Joseph Cohen High School and she said yes, how did you know. I said I remember you, your name was Helen Woodson, she said yes, what was your name, I said Lillian. She said I just can't place you, and I said well, you know I was raised in the Jewish Children's Home and she said the only people I can remember from the Jewish Children's Home was Roger Perlis, George Plotkin and a girl who was a dark brunette

and married a _____ man. I said, well Helen that was me, she said Oh it could not have been you, this girl had dark hair and had ~~olive~~ much more olive and I'm certain it wasn't you. But it was me.

The girls at Newman like Audrey King, Nettie King's daughter and I can remember being invited to birthday parties at her house. We were always like the outsiders looking in, but you got enough exposure where it really was kinda fun to look in. I mean, you know, it was a pleasant experience to see them and you knew that your clothes were not your clothes and their lunches were much fancier, but it never was a source of envy to me, it was a gradual learning process.

Good for you Lillian. You know my father-in-law, Rabbi Heller, disapproved of the Newman School. All of Isaac's friends, most of Issac's friends went there and he didn't, he went to public school, but Issac's father felt that it was such an ~~unnatural~~ unnatural environment that only ~~rich~~ very rich children and children from the Home was the whole population there. He didn't think that was good, that it didn't bother you too much.

Apparently not, I think maybe the contrast of going to Joseph Cohen gave me an indoctrination into the life cycle before I left the Home. I mean, it was just total contrast to what I had been used to.

Which did you like best?

Well, I think if I had been one of the rich kids I would have liked Newman best. I don't even remember it being a matter of choices, but one of the people that really made an impression on me and was wonderful to me, was Ruth Levy, who was my staff person at the Jewish Federation and when it came time for me to leave the home, she interviewed me and she said now Lillian your Aunt Hilda would like you to come live with her, but if you would prefer you could find you a nice place to live. I said I definitely do not want to live with my Aunt Hilda because I knew that was more regimentation.

This was the strict one?

Yes. So she found me a boarding house with Aunt Katey Feldman, this was Kaety and Dave Feldman on the corner of Willow and Joseph. Actually Aunt Katey had three other girls living there and she had a daughter and son and my first job was making \$7.50 per week as a legal secretary for Walter and I was a good one. Usually-- Ruth Levy always said now Lillian we are going to find you a better job, and in the mean time I had started going with Manuel and I guess now, I was close to eighteen and probably still making \$7.50 to \$10.00 a week and Ruth Levy was wonderful, she would say now Lillian we are going to subsidy you, you can't possibly get along with that, so whatever additional money I needed my room and board I remember was \$25 per month and whatever the Jewish Federation gave me the differential of whatever I needed, which wasn't much in those days. Like the early part of the week Manuel said would you like to get married on Sunday and I said well ok, I guess so and Ruth called me about Tuesday and she said I have wonderful news, I want you to go see Ben Friedman at the Bay Shoe Company to be interviewed for a job. So I went down and he interviewed me, he said alright you start Monday at \$25 per week and now I had this terrible problem of whether to get married or go to work for this astronomical sum of money and I really deliberated over it. I couldn't decide whether I wanted to be a career woman.

You couldn't do both?

Oh, indeed not, so I got married on Sunday. I remember I had to call them and tell them I would be in to work on Monday. But Ruth Levy was very, very nice to me and always kept a sort of watchful eye. It's very interesting at one point, she said Lillian you look awfully thin to me, I think you should go to, I want you to go to Dr. Jacobs at Touro, Dr. Sidney Jacobs, and have a check up and I remember going to the clinic and I was so humiliated because in the Home we were treated like regular patients, we would go to a doctor's office be ushered in like anybody else and I had never been to a clinic before and I remember I was just demoralized by the whole thing. I remember I hated it and I would never go back

Was this before or after you were married?

Oh, this was before I was married, while I was working, she kept a watchful eye on me and I guess she didn't realize that I had never had this kind of medical attention at the Home. If we went to the dentist, we went to the dentist office. I remember Dr. Debeis, who was the first peditrician. I remember H.P. Marks who was probably the last one I had in the Home, no H.P. was a staff member at the Home, but we really were treated in a very upperity fashion when you think about it. There was nothing particularly terrible about the experiences. I sure I had some that I have chosen to surpress or bury and only maintain the good ones.

As you think back on it now, do you consider your years in the Home to be a good or poor experience?

Well, from everything I've said, I'm sure you gathered that I felt it was a wonderful experience. I mean I think I got a very well rounded education, I think they kept a pattern of morality in my life that I cling to, I mean if you got caught lying or cheating or chewing gum, I mean if you got punished to the full letter of the law it really sort of, it was a very impressive type of environment, I think.

Is there anything that especially stands out in your memory?

Well, I think one of the things that really as I, its suddenly coming to me. Uncle Harry had a fantistic sense of taste and he had a really stunning apartment at the Home, I am sure much to the ^{surgine} of the Board members. I mean his ^{covet} life style was pretty elegant. He had a closet which to this day I covered, I would love to have one just like it, he had beautiful china and cystal and silver. I mean he was a single man and I guess his whole salary went to his extravagant pleasures, whatever they might have been. He had this fantastic sense of style and taste and I'm thinking of all the people who really made these impressions on me. Apparently I didn't pick up any of the cheap, bad stuff, I only picked up the goodies.

Did you time at the Home affect your later life?

Yes. The thing that amazes me is that I see the contrast between myself and some of the kids who react in the exact opposite fashion, that have resentment that are ashamed to admit that they were raised there, that make a great secret of it and don't acknowledge their Judism or any part of that life is like a secret thing that they are ashamed of. I can't quite understand how their sentiments stem of this because I think it something to be proud of. As I say I have always reaped much pleasure in recalling the memories and the life was not painful to me.

Do you have any idea what made your attitude be so healthy about it and others be so unhealthy?

One of the things prior to Uncle Harry was, lets assume a boy or a girl graduated from high school at age 18 and they didn't seem to know quite what to do with them, so they would keep them in the Home ~~and shelter~~ in this sheltered environment and then they would put them in the community at lets say age 22 or 23 and many of these kids couldn't adjust because they come from this sort of protected insulation and than they would get out into the world and really could not coup with it and they became a group of malcontents, ~~but there were quite a few of boys who were communist, they went out there.~~ I won't mention Issac's incident in this, but there were quite a few boys who were communist, they went out there.

What does Issac have to do with this?

They would put them in jail and Issac defended them?

Really.

Yes.

That's before I ever met him. No it wasn't, I don't think so because one night I will never forget we were at a dinner party here and I mentioned it.

Here at our house?

Yes. Isaac wasn't thrilled, he denied it, but I really remember it very well.

He couldn't deny it if he did it. He represented the Civil Liberties here. So he had to defend everybody.

You know its like the kids who were products of the '60's, they don't seem to be ~~terribly~~ terribly productive and have no motivation and they were the marijuana smokers, those that just don't seem to perform at their top level

You give a lot of credit to Uncle Harry?

Oh, yes. The people that I'm speaking about, I think were really there prior to my growing up.

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The people that you knew, do you think they had pretty much the same attitude that you had?

I don't think so, I don't think all of them did.

I just have to say that all in all the years were productive rather than destructive.

They had what they called the alumni baseball team and they used to come and play baseball every Sunday morning at the Home, and I can remember we would come home from Sunday school and see all these old fellows out there playing baseball. Of course, I met Manuel after I left the Home, I knew who he was, but only as having seen him out there.

Do you keep up with any of the people you were at the Home with now?

Del I keep up with and Louise, ~~she-comes-to-town~~ when she comes to town I hear from her, Freida, her son was going to Tulane Law School and I introduced him to my niece's daughter, they got married, so I guess you might say I kept up with her. Not really a lot, but since you know I moved to the French Quarter I don't keep up with anybody, I have a whole new world down there.